



## Search Engine Marketing Ethics Adhere to the Highest Standards

---

Your company has invested untold time and resources to create its brand image — both online and offline. And just as participating in unethical sales, marketing and advertising practices offline can result in negative publicity, sanctions by trade organizations, or actions by government/law enforcement authorities — unethical online tactics (particularly search engine optimization) can significant damage your online brand. Search engines regularly monitor websites for the use of certain techniques that cross the line into areas they view as unethical — and will ban those websites from their index, rendering them invisible to the search engine user.

### **Beware of Questionable Search Engine Marketing Tactics:**

Your goal is to deliver relevant information about your business to potential customers. Search properties have the same goal for their customers. If you, or any entity that you hire, employs any practice that devalues the integrity and relevance of a search property's results, you are "spamming" or "spamdexing."

Spamdexing includes:

- **Targeting keywords not related to your website.**
- **Attempting to cause a search engine's results to display multiple listings for the same content** — this is done by marketers who engage in inappropriate tactics in a number of ways, including registering multiple domain names and optimizing content on each website for the same keyword or phrase in the hopes of dominating page-after-page of search results for a keyword or phrase. You are entitled to any rankings you can achieve with your own website — pushing the envelope by working multiple domains or some other tactic in an effort to dominate a search results set is widely considered spamdexing.
- **Violating submission limits** — some novice marketers believe there is an advantage to submitting your site or individual pages from your website repeatedly. There is no benefit to this tactic, and it may cause your site to be red-flagged for a penalty by the major search engines.
- **Using colored text on a same-color background** — in an effort to increase "keyword frequency" or "keyword weight" metrics, or to add keywords to a Web page that are not covered in the visible content, some marketers seek to "hide" keywords in the background of their client's Web pages in a number of ways. Popular strategies include tiny text at the bottom of Web pages, same color text on same color background, or a single white pixel repeated to produce a white background and then white text (which would of course make the text invisible) for the additional keywords. Any of these strategies are easily detected and penalized by most major search engines.

- **Page-swapping** — the practice of submitting an optimized page for the purpose of attaining a high ranking and then, once the ranking is attained, swapping that page out for the “real” or “actual” Web page.
- **Page-jacking:** the practice of copying a competitor’s Web page, posting it to your Web page, submitting it, and then enjoying a similar ranking to the one your competitor attained using their stolen page (often, once the ranking is attained, the marketer will substitute their own page so the searcher never sees the stolen page).
- **Cloaking or stealth scripting:** the practice of using a script to detect the search engine’s crawler or spider by its IP address, and then serve the search engine a page different than the one that the searcher would see (a more sophisticated technology enabled page-swapping scheme). When a searcher clicks on the resulting ranking, the same script determines that the click is not a search engine and redirects the visitor to another page of the website, different than the one that was indexed.
- **“Keyword stuffing”** — the practice of repeating or including multiple or even single iterations of off-topic keywords within hidden areas of a site, such as the Meta keywords tag or the comments tag in the HTML — parts of the Web page that are not visible to someone viewing that Web page in a browser
- **Trademark hijacking** — intentionally targeting competitors or anyone else’s trademarked keywords in any area of the website. This is typically performed by placing others’ trademarked words in a meta keyword tag or within other hidden areas of the page. It can also be practiced in paid search advertising by paying for text advertisements on branded trademarked keywords or phrases of your competitor, or inappropriately placing trademarked terms in your text-ad copy.
- **Redirecting pages too quickly** — the practice of using the HTML meta-refresh statement to accomplish the same goal of page swapping or cloaking, by developing a keyword specific, highly optimized Web page that once visited, quickly resolves to another page that is different than the one that achieved the ranking.
- **Tiny-Texting** — the practice of using text that is too small to read on a page (or same color on same color background, etc.) to hide additional keywords or increase keyword frequency or weight metrics in pursuit of search engine rankings.
- **Duplicate content** — creating or promoting the practice of duplicating content either across multiple domains or even on the same domain in an effort to create more search-engine-optimized real estate. This tactic often causes an immediate penalty because every major search engine has sophisticated duplicate content detection technology.
- **Linking schemes** — the practice of pursuing bogus, manufactured, or otherwise questionable inbound links from a variety of types of sites in pursuit of higher rankings. Variations of this form of spam include:
  - **Link Farms** — where an SEM vendor, or other company, maintains hundreds of websites and for a fee, they will ensure that any, some or most of those websites link to your website in the pursuit of a higher search engine ranking.
  - **Customer Inter-Linking** — where the SEM company requires customers to maintain a links page and post links to their different new and current clients in an effort to increase all of their clients’ rankings in search results.

Search engines consider inbound links as evidence of a website's importance within a community of relevant documents. The algorithms have become so sophisticated that they are particularly adept at identifying and penalizing "fake links" or links that have clearly no commercial value, or that were achieved through some pay-for-link scheme. Search engines do reward relevant, legitimate links from websites such as industry resource sites, news sites, directory sites, etc.

Your SEM firm should pursue a "link popularity" strategy, but it should be limited to submission to human-edited directories such as Yahoo!, The Open Directory (dmoz.org), and actual content and commercial websites of companies and organizations related to your industry.

If it sounds too good to be true — it probably is. Worse, rapid link development from questionable resource sites, or sites owned or those which can be easily influenced by your SEM vendor (read: they own or are in partnership with the owner of the collection of websites), should cause a client to be wary.

It doesn't take much to cause a website to be banned or penalized by a major search engine, and the fastest way to earn such a penalty is to engage in a questionable linking strategy. Worse, the search engines will not notify you that your site has been penalized, and the major search engines do not have customer relations teams to help you get your site un-banned, or un-penalized. It can be a long and difficult task correcting the penalty incurred from an overly aggressive SEM company.

Generally, the only links that are legitimate are from legitimate, real websites, operated by companies not controlled by the SEM firm.

You can achieve prominent search engine rankings, significant search engine traffic and an impressive conversion rate while maintaining your search engine marketing ethics and integrity.

As a rule, the search engine marketing firm should:

- Work with your existing website and not propose that you create a new, independent website for the purpose of the SEM engagement.
- Work with your existing technology platform and demonstrate skill in remediation of any search engine crawler traps or challenges by helping you to fix them in your site, not by proposing a solution that sits external to your website.
- Work with your existing inbound links, and not propose schemes to pump-up your inbound link quotient by hundreds or thousands in a short period of time — link solicitation from real sites takes time, e-mails, phone calls, negotiation, persuasion, but not technology. If there appears to be too much technology in the link generation component of your engagement, be concerned.

Make sure your search engine optimization process utilizes legitimate and ethical techniques to ensure that your website is found within the major search properties when searches are performed for the keywords that you are targeting. This will result in driving qualified traffic to your website.

A high quality SEM firm will never misrepresent the content of your website to the search engine or break any laws (trademark, copyright, etc.). No high quality SEM firm would ever engage in any tactic that could risk their client's good standing in any search engine.

It goes without saying that a high quality SEM firm would never misrepresent someone else's work as their own, provide a false or misleading case study, or provide client references of companies or individuals for whom they have never performed work (friends or family members willing to lie for them). No reputable SEM firm should make performance promises they have no intention, nor any likelihood of being able to keep in order to win the business.

No reputable SEM firm should ever set an unreasonable expectation, or allow a client to engage their services if their expectations of that vendor's abilities is inconsistent with what is possible with search engine marketing. No tiny regional motel, for example, should expect to attain a high ranking on a search for the keyword, "motel." If the SEM vendor tells that customer that this is a possible outcome, they are either inexperienced or worse, they are misleading that prospective customer.

As is the case with any engagement for any professional service, the buyer must do his/her homework, and the buyer should query potential vendors for their adherence to the ethical standards listed above.